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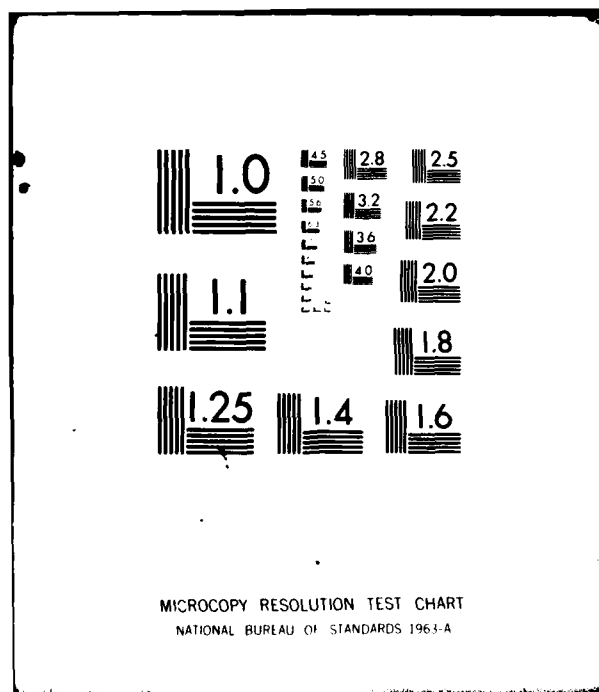
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STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE  
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Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

CHINA IN THE YEAR 2000: MODERNIZATION, GLOBAL POWER  
AND THE STRATEGIC BALANCE

by

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# ABSTRACT

✓ The efforts of China's Communist government to attain the goal of restoring China to what it sees as its rightful place in the first rank of world powers will face many obstacles in the next 20 years.

In carrying out its program, designated the Four Modernizations, China is focusing on agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense. The leadership has demonstrated remarkable intellectual flexibility and has openly turned to the West. The program will place severe strains on political institutions, resources, and the people themselves, and it is inconceivable that it will close the gap between the superpowers and China within 20 years. Nevertheless, China is likely to enjoy greater influence in global affairs as economic development progresses and Chinese military capabilities are upgraded. ↗

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## FOREWORD

This Futures Group paper analyzes the current conditions, programs, and trends within China in an attempt to predict its role in international relations in the year 2000. The author predicts that China's relative position will be important in terms of contributing to strategic balance or imbalance; however, the Chinese government will not have succeeded in closing the gap which exists between the superpowers and China.

This paper was prepared as a contribution to the field of national security research and study. As such, it does not reflect the official view of the US Army War College, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

  
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CHINA IN THE YEAR 2000: MODERNIZATION, GLOBAL  
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When the Roman Empire was at its zenith, the Han Dynasty ruled a unified China which stretched from Central Vietnam to the Korean Peninsula, and west to Central Asia and the Tibetan Plateau. The rise and fall of successive dynasties periodically interrupted China's administrative continuity, but the Han people, as the Chinese called themselves, never lost their cultural identity or racial distinctiveness. While the age of empire may have passed, China's Communist heirs are setting forth with vigor and determination toward an ambitious goal: restoring China to what they see as its rightful place in the first rank of world powers. And although China's present leaders have cast aside much of the intellectual impedimenta of Confucian China, their sense of historical continuity remains undiminished. If China is even partially successful in attaining its developmental objectives, its influence in world affairs will be significantly enhanced. The purpose of this paper is to assess, in general terms, the likely nature of China's relationship to the present super-powers 20 years hence.

The presumption of some degree of success in the modernization drive will be evident in the discussion which follows. However, the scope and potential implications of this success are very uncertain, and will only become apparent over a period of years. For this reason most analysts avoid specific projections of China's capabilities beyond 1990; such projections are of necessity highly conditional and potential scenarios are simply too numerous. Forecasting relations with other independent actors

obviously compounds attendant uncertainties. Nevertheless, there is a need to forecast the major issues in triangular relations, recognizing that their precise dimensions will remain problematical for some time.

Will China be a global power in the year 2000, and if so, how will it compare to the United States and the Soviet Union? The first step in addressing these questions is to establish the overriding goal of China's development program, first proposed in 1975 and since designated the Four Modernizations. The program calls for rapid development in four key sectors: agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense. Its express purpose is "to build a modern, powerful socialist country" by the year 2000. In carrying out the Four Modernizations the present leadership, variously characterized as "pragmatic" or "moderate," has demonstrated remarkable intellectual flexibility, "praising Mao Zedong Thought while burying it" (as one observer has noted) and exhorting the masses to "learn truth from facts." China has meanwhile turned openly to the West and Japan for technology, trade and investment, and is experimenting with free markets and wage incentives to boost production. In return, China has tacitly accepted spreading elitism, foreign influence and inflation as part of the price of rapid modernization.

In addressing the prospects for achieving global power status within 20 years, China's assets and liabilities can be considered in terms of elements of national power. These include geography and resources, economy, politics, society/psychology, and military capabilities. The first, geographic location, is hardly an advantage. Neighboring countries are either hostile or largely inaccessible; proximity to Japan is one of the few benefits. Moreover, despite its vast size, the geography of China is not an

inherent strength. Only 11 percent of the land area is cultivated, with the remainder pastures, forests or wasteland. On the small proportion of arable land China must support a growing population of over one billion people. Although a stringent birth control program, implemented throughout the country, hopes to achieve zero population growth by 2000, the population of China will likely be about 1.3 billion at that point.<sup>1</sup> Insuring that these additional millions can be fed is China's first task in its modernization drive.

China's actual and potential energy resources deserve special mention. Initial optimism on the extent of China's recoverable oil and coal reserves has faded somewhat. In fact, one recent estimate now projects that exports of coal and oil from China will begin declining in the 1990's and may actually reach a crossover point around the year 2000, after which China will become a net energy importer.<sup>2</sup> The domestic demand for energy generated by China's modernization will more than consume the incremental increases expected from expanded production. Nevertheless, China is one among a handful of fortunate countries relatively free from resource dependence.

The growth of Chinese power over the next two decades will depend primarily on the state of China's economy. During the first 30 years of Communist rule, China made remarkable progress in achieving agricultural self-sufficiency while simultaneously building a modern industrial base. Despite these accomplishments it lost ground to the two superpowers, as well as to many other developed countries. It is inconceivable that the

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<sup>1</sup>US Census Bureau "medium series" population projections for 2000 are: 1.329 billion. Reported in The Global 2000 Report to the President, Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1980, pp. 20-21.

<sup>2</sup>Kim Woodard, "China's Energy Prospects," Problems of Communism, XXXIX:1, January-February 1980, p. 64.

Four Modernizations, or any other plan, can enable China to close the gap between it and the two superpowers in a scant 20 years. However, a fair measure of success will be essential if that gap is to be kept from widening. Whether the initial momentum can be maintained is questionable. The original economic development plans of 1977-78 have already experienced first readjustment and now retrenchment. Bold and innovative measures are called for, but obstacles are numerous and for the Chinese these are uncharted waters. China's developmental base was seriously eroded by the Cultural Revolution, which effectively halted scientific progress for the better part of a decade, and left the Chinese education system in a total shambles. Finding the trained human resources required to carry out the Four Modernizations is a serious problem.

From the standpoint of domestic politics, the potential for serious instability, with attendant disruption of modernization efforts, is still present. While the current moderate leadership is adroitly consolidating its hold on political and economic power, latent Maoism in important institutions such as the Party bureaucracy and the military remains a threat. Failure of the development programs to achieve their stated goals could activate a power struggle among competing factions which might impede or even reverse China's present pragmatic course. The tendency in the past for outsiders to underestimate the turbulence of Chinese politics at the higher levels should also be recognized. Nevertheless, the current programs appear to have struck a responsive chord in the Chinese masses. Disillusioned by the self-destructiveness of the Cultural Revolution and now suspicious of all ideological appeals, they are likely to respond to the promises of substantially increased material benefits and intellectual liberalization which modernization holds out.

Severe strains will be placed on the collective psyche of the Chinese people in the coming decades, as social and political values are transformed in the drive for economic development. The inevitable creation of technical, managerial and intellectual elites will supplant Maoist China's relative egalitarianism. It is likely that this loss will be more than compensated by a higher standard of living for most Chinese, and the satisfaction of long-repressed personal desires. If sufficiently organized, motivated, and directed, the Chinese people can be the single most important asset in China's modernization efforts. The sense of wasted years and lost opportunities is keenly felt by most Chinese, and if it can be translated into increased agricultural and industrial productivity, the prospects for China's modernization are dramatically enhanced. A comparatively high level of social cohesion is another factor in China's favor; 94 percent of its citizens are ethnic Han Chinese, reflecting a distinctively and uniformly Chinese cultural tradition and world view. Moreover, most of the 6 percent who are members of minority nationalities (numbering an impressive 60 million) live outside the principal agricultural and industrial areas.

As an element of national power, China's present military capabilities are a distinct liability. The low overall level of economic development; the longstanding tradition of self-reliance in all activities; and the vicissitudes of Chinese politics and economic policy over the past 30 years, have all contributed to China's military inferiority and consequent strategic vulnerability. This is painfully apparent when comparing Chinese capabilities to those of the Soviet Union, easily the most serious threat to China's security. Although China's huge land forces--totaling over 3.5 million--outnumber those of the Soviet Union, the Soviets hold heavy quantitative and qualitative advantages in virtually all categories of modern land, sea,

and air weapons systems, whether conventional or strategic. China is acutely aware of its vulnerability, and this realization is a driving imperative in the development of its foreign policy.

From a security standpoint, Chinese military weakness dictates strategy. To discourage a Soviet nuclear strike, the Chinese rely on their small strategic missile force--a modest assortment of MRBMs and IRBMs, and a handful of ICBMs. Although reportedly under development for years, China has no known SLBMs at this time. Conventionally, China is saddled with "People's War Under Modern Conditions," an updated version of Mao's classic strategic doctrine. Defensive in nature, the Chinese strategy presumes multiple penetrations of Chinese territory by mobile, well-equipped enemy forces enjoying air and firepower superiority. The Chinese intend to "lure the enemy deep," resisting all the way, until he is overextended and the momentum of his attack has been dissipated. Massive counterattacks will then be launched by regular forces, militia and guerrillas. At present the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has no realistic alternative other than "People's War," but obviously it is not pleased by the situation.

The modernization of national defense has been accorded the lowest priority among the Four Modernizations, but this may be more out of necessity than an accurate reflection of national priorities. Given the magnitude of the task, the deficiencies in the PLA can only be corrected if China possesses a sound economy and a modern, efficient industrial base. No country, the United States included, can realistically be expected to "rearm" China, nor can the Chinese entertain any hope of purchasing outright enough weapons to make a real difference. Until China has laid the

foundation for domestic production, the full-scale modernization of national defense cannot proceed.

This brief assessment of China's developmental prospects has identified some key strengths and a number of serious weaknesses. While it is impossible to predict China's condition 20 years hence, some general conclusions may be drawn. Overall, the economic factor clearly emerges as the most crucial, and it is highly improbable that China could build an economy which would challenge those of the United States or the Soviet Union. China may possess the requisite territory, population, natural resources, political skill, social cohesion and national will to eventually become a superpower, but it will take more time than the brief span of two decades. The tremendous disparities in economic development are simply too great a handicap to overcome.

If China is not on the verge of superpower status, is a future of static or even reduced relative power a likely possibility? In order to fulfill such a prophecy, it would seem that prolonged upheaval akin to the Cultural Revolution would have to reoccur. At present, such a development does not seem likely. The self-destructiveness of the past has been a bitter lesson, one which no one is eager to repeat. Whether "moderates" or "radicals" rule in Beijing, progress will be the measure by which their performance is judged. Progress may be "two steps forward, one step back," but regression is not a tolerable policy option.

It appears that China, 20 years in the future, is likely to fall somewhere between the two extremes. And although narrowed somewhat, the range of possible outcomes is still wide. Economic development may be sporadic or steady. Politics may be stable or turbulent, and leaders will come and

go. Foreign policy may be positive and constructive, or it may be xenophobic or destabilizing. Military capabilities may improve at a painfully slow pace or they may be upgraded fairly rapidly. The variables are too numerous to allow any specific forecast; however, growth and progress in some form appear nearly inevitable. While China will not be a superpower in 2000, it probably will be in the first rank of world powers, no small accomplishment in itself. Spared war and catastrophic internal upheaval, China is probably the most prominent among a small handful of countries possessing the potential to develop into superpowers in the next century. It will almost certainly be the dominant regional military power and, as such, will have to come to terms with Japan's economic preeminence in Asia. As Japan pursues foreign policy alignments in future years, closer association with China, perhaps in a symbiotic commercial and security relationship, is one conceivable alternative.

Problems in forecasting China's power in the year 2000 are infinitely compounded by the dynamics of the international system. The power of China can only be assessed relative to the power of other principal players in the system, but the system is constantly in flux. For example, the future relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union is extremely important to China. Over the next two decades both superpowers will continue to share vital interests in raising the standards of living in their respective countries; reducing somewhat the burgeoning economic costs inherent in uncontrolled arms races; resolving crises short of war; and maintaining a stable deterrent balance. Bilateral negotiations will remain a prominent feature of US-Soviet relations, but are not likely to conclusively resolve the divergent interests which underlie their global



competition. Soviet global policy will continue to reflect the basic dualism of expansion and coexistence, with the United States constrained to respond accordingly.

In view of the projected course of US-Soviet relations over the next 20 years, what will be China's impact on the global strategic balance? The growth in national power which can be expected to accompany a moderately successful modernization and development program should serve to progressively reduce China's strategic vulnerability. Most notably this will apply to the Soviet Union, but parenthetically includes the United States and any other potential enemies as well. To the extent that China is successful in correcting military deficiencies, gradual shifts in its foreign policy should become evident. China's current international strategy is described as "a united front against hegemonism." As Chinese power grows, the "united front" aspect of its foreign policy will likely be retained, but the operational importance attached to it progressively reduced. At present, the United States and other "antihegemonists" play a critical role in redressing the strategic imbalance between China and the Soviet Union. As the upgrading of its own capabilities begins to close the gap of vulnerability, China will be afforded greater flexibility in its foreign policy to pursue exclusively Chinese interests.

The single most potent element of China's expanded power and influence will likely be the growth of its strategic nuclear capability. Despite the economic setbacks and political turmoil of the past 25 years, China has carefully nurtured a modest, independent nuclear weapons development program, producing both warheads and delivery systems. From a fission device in 1964, through a thermonuclear detonation in 1967, to the successful test of a

full-range ICBM in 1980, the Chinese effort has been characterized by steady, if unspectacular, progress. The emphasis on science and industry, and the acquisition of foreign technology as part of the Four Modernizations, can provide an unprecedented boost to China's strategic programs. An operational SLBM will probably be deployed sometime in the next 10 years, further extending China's global reach.

As ICBM and SLBM deployments extend global reach, it would not be surprising if China's global interests proliferate accordingly. The ability to project power into distant regions could make China more inclined to identify vital interests in affairs previously beyond its capacity to influence. As a practical matter, greater involvement in affairs once considered within the exclusive domain of the two superpowers is not only possible, but probable. At the same time, Chinese claims to regional predominance in Asia will be largely realized, Japan's economic power notwithstanding. Finally, China cannot hope to match the strategic capabilities of either the United States or the Soviet Union, at least by 2000. But the Chinese need not duplicate the arsenals of the two superpowers in order to achieve a fairly high order of usable, effective power. As an independent player possessing a modest range of nuclear capabilities, China could seek to influence global events if it felt its vital interests were being threatened.

In conclusion, even if only moderately successful, the long-term impact of China's modernization efforts on international relations may well be dramatic. Should China continue to independently develop and improve its nuclear capabilities, and there is no reason to expect otherwise, the implications for the strategic balance are especially significant. After decades of managing a bipolar balance, by the year 2000 the superpowers may

have to acknowledge the existence of a tripolar balance. Strategic considerations may bind China to one superpower or the other over fairly long periods of time, but in the long term it is fundamentally an independent power center. This reality will become increasingly clear by the end of the century. Insuring global stability in an environment which features continued East-West competition, growing North-South tensions, global energy crises and a precarious world economy, could be seriously complicated by China's emergence. Similarly, the SALT process is already threatened by the proliferation of participants and the complexity of issues, and worrisome trends in nuclear proliferation are evident. In Asia, where the United States retains vital interests, regional stability may be placed in jeopardy, as nations like Vietnam are no more inclined to accept Chinese hegemony than they are the Soviet variety. The preponderance of US foreign trade shifted from Europe to Asia in the mid-1970's, reflecting the dynamism and economic potential of the Pacific Basin. Moreover, recent estimates forecast that East Asia will be the locus of the world's greatest economic growth over the next 20 years.

It is hardly conceivable that China can catch up with the United States or the Soviet Union, at least by the year 2000. However, by then it could be emerging as the world's third-ranked power in aggregate terms. Given the complexity of critical issues, this emergence might prove disruptive to the international system if not carefully managed. Since the outcome of China's Four Modernizations is far from certain, any forecasts of the future will remain highly speculative for some time. Nevertheless, the gradual and inevitable growth of Chinese power will have serious implications for US national security policy as the end of this century approaches.

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